

Marlot Conservation Group (MCG) Work report to Whixall Parish Council meeting 9 March 2022

Period 9 February- 7 March 2022

During the first week of February Mr Paul Martin (Cattle Farmer) put 4 cows on the Marlot for the start of the conservation grazing. The MCG continued to dig out re-generated willow growth in the front meadow by hand. Although heavy and laborious work the team has managed to clear a considerable patch in the front meadow adjacent to the creeping willow patches. It is intended to prepare this cleared area and sow the remaining wild flower seeds (750g) later on in March.

On 11 February the MCG met to discuss the annual work activity plan based on the 2013 Marlot Management Plan and previous years experiences. The work plan will be used as a basis for work on volunteer days (every Tuesday) but is, of course, fluid depending on changing circumstances.

The ever changing weather and incoming storms disrupted work in the third week of February with only daily checks on the cattle being conducted and Alan Lomas singularly carrying out additional willow clearance on a non-volunteer day. Once the storms had passed a full assessment of the Marlot was made to ascertain the extent of any damage. One large oak tree on the perimeter between the Marlot and Plantation House field was found to have been uprooted and had fallen along the bank and was now leaning onto another tree inside the Marlot. Luckily this was the extent of the storm damage. The owners at Plantation House were informed of MCG work to clear those oak limbs and branches that had come down into their field. The oak was too large to fully cut down and only those limbs and branches that were safe to cut were processed – however it was fully cleared off Plantation House field and wood stacked for the owners at Plantation House.

In the last week of February, the cattle escaped and pushed through the electric fence into the pond area and over into Plantation House field. Paul Martin was informed and the cows re-located back into the Marlot. It was understood that a loose dog (from Plantation House) spooked the cows.

At the beginning of March, the MCG decided to check and clear the “Jubilee Hedge” area in preparation for the event in late March. This consisted of measuring and checking the hedge planting plan and a full brush-cut and clear of brash and debris from the immediate area, together with an initial health and safety risk assessment for the event. Willow clearance in the front meadow also continued.

On 4th March the cattle once again escaped and this time Paul Martin recovered them and took them to a new location as it would appear there is very little grazing left in the Marlot. Unfortunately, the weather and the cows have conspired against us and excessive poaching by the cows has caused considerable damage to the main path and meadow and pond pathways which will require a lot of work to level out and make safe. The MCG has discussed this with Peter Boyer at Natural England and asked for assistance, in the guise of a tracked vehicle with shovel, to assist in re-levelling and flattening the pathways – this will be dependant of on their availability and workload. The MCG will in the meantime attempt to repair some of the damage on the meadow and pond pathways by hand. The first newt surveys of the year will take place on Friday 11 March and Saturday 12 March with Nicky Hunter again conducting them. Attendance will be restricted to MCG members only, due to the safety concerns of the pathways – later surveys may include Natural England volunteers.

Graham Turnbull, Marlot Conservation Group
7 March 2022